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## Gangaikondan Kailasanathar Temple

By [Indian Columbus](#) - [October 18, 2022](#)

The Chola dynasty had many great kings. Among them, **Rajaraja Chola I** was perhaps the greatest. And his son **Rajendra Chola I** was greater than the greatest. He rose up to his father's name and went even beyond his legacy. Like his father, he, too, never tasted any defeat. He was successful in all his expeditions. His march towards the Ganges was well-known among so many invasions of Rajendra.

Rajendra brought the water of the sacred river to his Chola empire. He began constructing a new city named **Gangaikonda Cholapuram** and a new magnificent temple for Shiva known as **Gangaikonda Choleeswaram**. From then on, he assumed the title of **Gangaikondan** (the one who won the Ganges).

Almost everyone who reads this article might know about the famous Gangaikonda Cholapuram. But not many would know about another temple sharing the same name as Gangaikonda Choleeswarar. It was built by **Isaana Pandita**, the Royal Guru of Rajendra, at **Koozhampandal** near Kanchipuram.

And hardly anyone realizes that there is one more town connected to the title of Rajendra. It is **Gangaikondan**, located near Tirunelveli in Southern Tamil Nadu. The town on the banks of the beautiful river, named Chittaru, has a magnificent Chola-era temple for Shiva known as **Kailasanathar Temple**. This article provides detailed coverage of this historic temple's architecture, iconography, inscriptions, history, and other aspects.



## Introduction

**Gangaikondan** is situated at a distance of 20 km north of Tirunelveli on the way to Madurai. A magnificent temple of Lord Shiva (called **Kailasanathar**) is located at the center of the town. The ancient temple, built during the Chola period, is architecturally beautiful and can be considered a paradise for heritage lovers.



### Legend

As per the legend, the sage **Agastya** consecrated three Shiva temples in the southern part of the Pandyan country.

The first temple was **Nellaiyappar** temple in the "venu" (bamboo) forest in Tirunelveli. It was worshipped by Surya and is considered the right eye of Shiva.

The second temple was **Kuttraleeswarar** temple in the "champaka" forest in Courtallam. It was worshipped by Chandra and is considered the left eye of Shiva.

The third temple was **Kailasanathar** temple in the "tintrini" or "kalpaka" (tamarind) forest in Gangaikondan. It was worshipped by **Agni** and is considered the third eye of Shiva.

After consecrating these three shrines, Agastya proceeded to Malayachalam and lived with his consort Lopamudra on the banks of the river Tamraparni (also called Tanporundam and Tan Porunai).

Another legend states that a cow regularly released its milk on a particular anthill. The cowherd, on observing this, reported to the King. The King discovered a Shiva Linga after clearing the anthill. He decided to build a shrine for Shiva Linga on that site. He heard a divine voice (called asareeri) from a **tamarind tree** advising him to spare the same. Hence, he started building the shrine on a nearby site leaving the original place undisturbed. The tree is considered the temple's sthala vruksha (holy tree).





## History

Among 12 inscriptions found in this vast temple, 7 are from Pandyas, 3 are from Cholas, one is from CholaPandyas, and one is unknown. The oldest inscription is from **Varaguna Varman Pandya I alias Komaranchandaiyan Pandya in 772 CE**. The latest inscription is from **Sundara Pandya in the 1530s**.

One detailed inscription from **Rajaraja Chola I** and another from **Rajendra Chola** continue to call this site Sri Vallabha Chaturvedi Mangalam. After Rajendra's conquest of the Gangetic delta region, the village was renamed. It can be assumed from the 11th-century inscriptions of Sundara Chola and Kulottunga Chola I. They address the site as **Gangaikonda Chola Chaturvedimangalam**.

The original temple was built by the Pandyas. It is evident from the Pandya inscriptions dated 8th and 9th-century CEs. The original name of the village was **Vallabha Chaturvedi Mangalam**. Here, the word Vallabha refers to some Pandya king.

Based on its structural characteristics, the present temple appears to be the result of extensive renovations and modifications done during the periods of Rajaraja, Rajendra, and Chola Pandya viceroys. The later Pandya kings, possibly Nayaka kings and wealthy people in the 18th and 19th centuries, also considerably contributed to the temple's structure and iconography.

An additional tidbit about the village not related to the temple....Gangaikondan is the birthplace of **Kodaganallur Sundara Swamigal**, a 19th-century saint.

### **Inscription # 1**

*Reference - A.R. No. 164 of 1895*

*Location - West Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - 772 CE; 7th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Komaranchadaiyan Pandya (Varaguna Varman I)*

*Language - Vattalettu script*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp. (Is this really an 8th-century inscription or a later Pandya period inscription? It is debatable.)

### **Inscription # 2**

*Reference - A.R. No. 166 of 1895*

*Location - East Wall of the mandapa in front of the sanctum*

*Period - 827 CE; 12th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Komaravarman Pandya (Sri Vallabhadeva)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp by an inhabitant of Kottaru.

### **Inscription # 3**

*Reference - A.R. No. 167 of 1895*

*Location - East Wall of the mandapa in front of the sanctum*

*Period - 829 CE; 14th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Komaravarman Pandya (Sri Vallabhadeva)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp.

### **Inscription # 4**

*Reference - A.R. No. 160 of 1895*

*Location - North Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - 1011 CE; 26th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Rajaraja Chola I*

*Language - Tamil*

This lengthy inscription recording the gift of land starts with the meikeerti of Rajaraja Chola as

"Tirumagal Pola". From this record, we learn that the provision was made for worship and offerings to Kshetrapala and Durga in the temple of Sri Kailayam in Sri Vallabha Mangalam, a Brahmadeyam in Kilkalar Kutram in Rajaraja Mandalam. The inscription also talks about the gift of a flower garden by the Sabha of the village, for the use of the temple. A lake named Viranarayana Eri, named after Parantaka Chola I, is also referred to in this inscription.

### **Inscription # 5**

*Reference - A.R. No. 162 of 1895*

*Location - South Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - 1042 CE; 21st year of the reign of the King mentioned below.*

*King - Jatavarman Sundara Chola Pandya*

*Language - Vatteluttu script*

The inscription records the gift of land. The deity is mentioned as Kailasaththu Perumanadigal. The village is mentioned as Gangaikonda Chola Chaturvedimangalam.

### **Inscription # 6**

*Reference - A.R. No. 165 of 1895*

*Location - West Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - 1018 CE; 7th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*



*King - Rajendra Chola I*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp.

### **Inscription # 7**

*Reference - A.R. No. 163 of 1895*

*Location - West Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - 1098 CE; 28th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Kulottunga Chola I*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp. It refers to the deity as Kailayamudaiyar. The village is mentioned as Gangaikonda Chola Chaturvedimangalam of Keelkalakkoottram sub-division in Rajaraja Pandi Naattu Mudikonda Cholavala Naadu division.

### **Inscription # 8**

*Reference - A.R. No. 168 of 1895*

*Location - East Wall of the mandapa in front of the sanctum*

*Period - 1150 CE(?); 18th year of the reign of the King mentioned below*

*King - Ko Jatavarman Pandya (Sri Vallabhadeva) (It is difficult to assume the exact Jatavarma Pandya)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription is incomplete.

### **Inscription # 9**

*Reference - A.R. No. 169 of 1895*

*Location - West Wall of the Goddess shrine*

*Period - 1530s CE*

*King - Ko Maravarma Pandya (Sundara Pandya)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription is damaged.

### **Inscription # 10**

*Reference - A.R. No. 170 of 1895*

*Location - North Wall of the Goddess shrine*

*Period - 1534/35 CE*

*King - Ko Maravarma Pandya (Sundara Pandya)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription records the gift of land.

### **Inscription # 11**

*Reference - A.R. No. 171 of 1895*

*Location - North Wall of the Goddess shrine*

*Period - 1530s CE*

*King - Ko Maravarma Pandya (Sundara Pandya)*

*Language - Tamil*

The inscription is damaged.

### **Inscription # 12**

*Reference - A.R. No. 161 of 1895*

*Location - North Wall of the sanctum*

*Period - Not known*

*King - Not known*

*Language - Vatteluttu script*

The inscription records the gift of a lamp. The name of the King is lost.

## **Layout**

Kailasanathar Temple, located at the center of the town, covers a vast area of around 2.5 acres. Its huge pond on the front side is spread over 0.5 acre.

The temple has two entrances, both facing the east direction. The northside entrance with a tall tower (Raja gopuram) is for the presiding deity **Kailasanathar**. The southside entrance without a tower is for his consort, **Anandavalli**.

The temple consists of east-facing garbhagriha or moolasthan (sanctum) for Kailasanathar, antarala, ardha mandapa, maha mandapa, mani mandapa or mukha mandapa, inner prakara (cicumambulatory path) and another mandapa on the way to the tower.

Anandavalli has all similar structures such as garbhagriha, ardha mandapa, maha mandapa, mukha mandapa, inner prakara and outer mandapa. Her shrine is located on the proper right side of the Kailasanathar shrine.

Both shrines are connected through a long pillared mandapa (corridor). There are many sub-shrines in both the inner prakaras as well as in this mandapa.

There is a big open-to-sky cicumambulatory path (outer prakara) around both shrines. Many trees are planted on this path.



### Kailasanathar

The east-facing sanctum (moolasthanam or garbhagriha) enshrines the presiding deity. He is called **Kailasanathar or Kailasapati**. He is found as a smaller Shiva Linga.

The top of the superstructure of vimana has eight sides. The vimana can be viewed only partially from the outer prakara.

The moolasthanam is extended into a small antarala. The entrance has two beautiful two-armed Dwarapalas. The doorkeeper at the southern end has his left arm in tarjani mudra (the gesture of threat). The other dwarapala has his left arm in suchi mudra. (It is a hand gesture, where the hand is in a fist, with the index finger extended and held upright and straight.) Their right arms rest on their respective maces. They belong to Rajaraja Chola or Rajendra Chola's time. They are named Dindi and Mundi nowadays.





### Chola-era Metal Icons

The sub-shrine on the north wall of the Ardha mandapa has a majestic bronze icon of **Nataraja** measuring about 4.5 feet. The equally high graceful image of Sivakami with a nilotpala flower in her right arm is standing next. These icons belong to the period of either Rajaraja I or Rajendra I.

To the right side of the entrance of antarala, the metal icons of Somaskanda are kept. They belong to the nearby Pannikulam temple. The later-era metal icons of Ganesha and Skanda-Valli-Devasena are also found here.

### Mani Mandapa

A small pillared Mani Mandpa is found outside the Ardha mandapa. The pillars of this structure have beautiful carvings.

### **Maha Mandapa**

Six tall and broad pillars adorned with the images of seated lions on the top are found in Maha mandapa. Four pillars have big Yazhis (mythical creatures) as their bases. Two middle pillars have big images of Bheema and Purushamriga. (As per a story from the Mahabharata epic, Bheema fought with a sphinx-like mythical creature.)





The other sides of all these six pillars are decorated with mini carvings depicting a soldier, a sage worshipping Shiva Linga, an elephant-faced female, a dancing girl, Ganesha, Nataraja, Karaikal Ammaiyar, four-armed Krishna playing the flute, a soldier holding a bow and arrow and others.

On the western end, a small Nandi is kept facing the direction of the presiding deity.

Two tall Shiva Lingas without bases are found on the mandapa's northeastern end. These ancient sculptures are named Gunanathar and Kuttralanathar nowadays. Two small and new Nandis are kept in front of them.

### **Inner Prakara**

The Maha mandapa is connected to the sanctum's circumambulatory path (prakara). There are many prominent sub-shrines and icons located here.

The stone sculptures of 63 great devotees of Shiva called Nayanmars, a three-legged form of Shiva named Jvaradeva and Navaneeta Krishna, are seen in the southern inner prakara. In the same prakara, the sub-shrine of Dakshinamurti is found on the south wall. It is a later addition as niche (Koshta) images are generally not found in the Pandya-region temples.

On the southwest corner, a beautiful Chola-era four-armed Ganesha with his trunk turned towards his right side standing on a lotus platform (peetham) is found in a sub-shrine. This sculpture is a masterpiece. As his trunk is turned towards his right side, he is called Valampuri Vinayaka. Finding Valampuri Vinayaka is rare in the Northern part of Tamil Nadu but is very common in the Tirunelveli region. The southwest corner is called Kanni Moolai. Hence, Vinayaka is also known as Kanni Moolai Ganapati, here. Usually, a mouse (called moonjuru) is seen as Ganesha's vahana (mount). But, here, it is an elephant seen opposite his shrine.



On the other corner, on the northwest side, an equally beautiful Chola-era sculpture of four armed Subramanya flanked by his two consorts, along with a Prabhavali (full-body halo) on the back, is found.





In front of the western outer wall of the sanctum, the icons of Kallapiran, Sree Devi and Bhoo Devi are kept. They are new additions.

Five small Shiva Lingas representing Panchabhuta Lingas and their respective consorts and Nandis, a prominent Shiva Linga named Viswanatha, Lakshmi and Saraswati are the other deities found in the western prakara.

As per the traditional belief, the sage Vamadeva offered his prayers to Kailasapati. Hence, his sculpture is found in the north prakara. Though it is not an ancient icon, it looks stunningly good.



Chandikeshwara is found in the south-facing tiny shrine. It is probably a Chola-era image.



A slightly old sculpture of Shanesvara and Bhairava are there in two separate sub-shrines.

Almost at the northeast corner, a shrine houses big stone icons of Nataraja and Sivakami, smeared with punugu perfume. Nataraja is named as Punugu Sabhapati. Karaikkal Ammaiyyar, Vyagrapada and Patanjali are also seen in the same shrine.



On either side of the inner entrance of Maha mandapa has Chola-era beautiful sculptures of Surya and Chandra facing towards the direction of the main shrine.

Adhikara Nandi facing north, is found as soon as one enters through this entrance.

### **Outer Corridor**

The outer entrance of Maha mandapa has two big stunning stone images of four-armed Dwarapalas. Ganesha is found beside the southern doorkeeper.



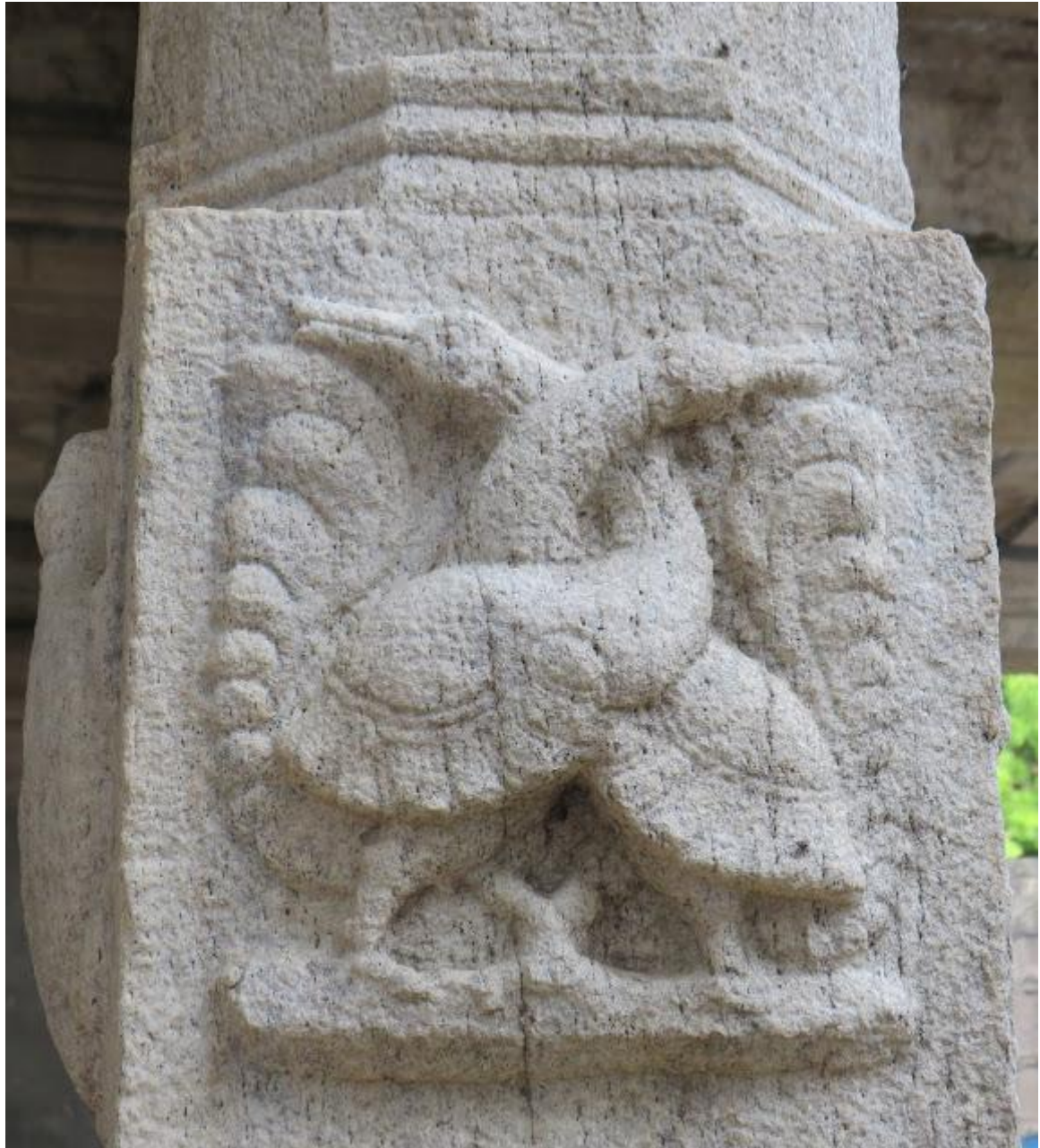
The lintel has carvings of the dancing girls instead of the typical representation of Gaja Lakshmi.

Nani mandapa, bali peetha (offering altar), dhvajasthambha (flag staff) are located in this outer corridor area, all facing the main shrine.









The vast space between the doorway of the Maha mandapa and the main outer entrance is mostly covered with a ceiling. This pathway extends into a long mandapa that ends in the southern end, thus connecting Kailasanathar temple with Anandavalli temple. The pillars of this structure have big Yazhi (mythical animal) bases and elephants or seated lions on the top. The other sides of the pillars have many small interesting carvings.







On the same mandapa, an east-facing shrine has the holy tamarind tree (sthala vruksha) and a Shiva Linga.



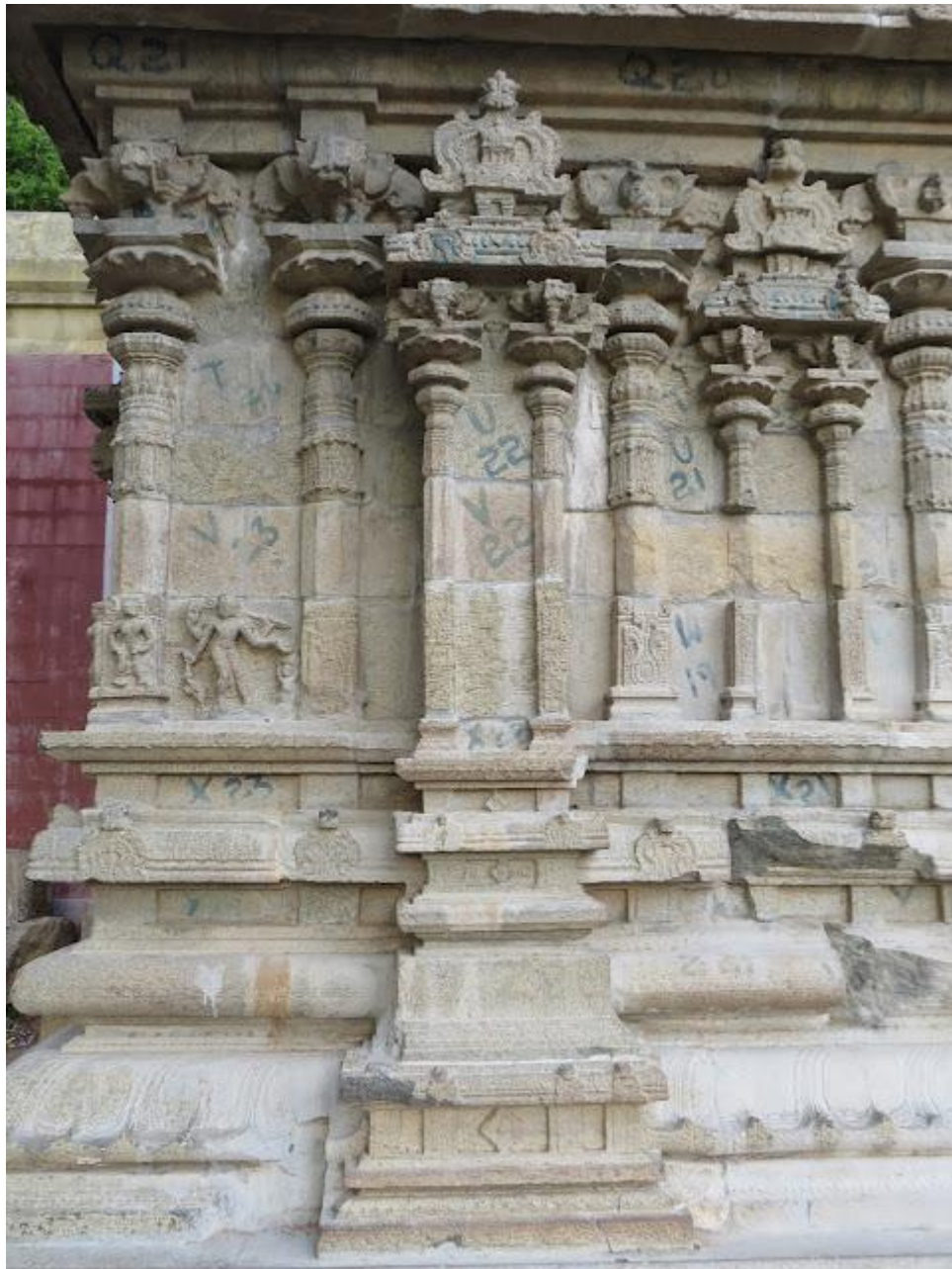


### **Main Entrance**

The main entrance in front of Kailasanathar temple has five tiers filled with colorful stucco images of various deities. The stone base also has many good miniature sculptures, architectural elements, and designs.





























### **Anandavalli**

Technically it is a single temple, divided into two sections. The section that enshrines Anandavalli is on the proper right side of the Kailasapati section.

The east-facing sanctum enshrines Anandavalli, a four-armed Goddess, in a standing posture. It is one of the few temples in the Pandya region, with four-armed Amman.

The Ardha mandapa is small. At the entrance, two big Dwarapalikas (female doorkeepers) are seen. Small images of Ganesha and Kartikeya are also found at the doors.

A small Mani mandapa that can be reached through a flight of steps has a few pillars with good carvings. The base of the mandapa has two beautiful relief images of Sanga Nidhi and Padma Nidhi. On the mandapa, two small Nandis (instead of one) face Anandavalli.

### **Inner Prakara of Anandavalli**

On the inner prakara of Anandavalli, the sub-shrines of Siddhi Ganapati, Murugan-Valli-Devasena and Chandikeshwari are located. Among them, the sculpture of Murugan is exceptionally artistic and appears to be ancient.

Palliyarai (the holy bed chamber of the deities) is also located on this circumambulatory path.

As per the tradition followed in the Pandya region temples, there is no niche (Koshta) images on the outer walls of the sanctum. However, in the places ideal for forming slots, there are representations of pavilions called panjaram with toranas (ornamental arches) adorning the upper sides. The toranas have the miniature sculptures of Dakshinamurti flanked by two sages, Vishnu flanked by his two consorts and Brahma flanked by his two consorts.

### **Outer Corridor of Anandavalli**

Nandi mandapa, bali peetha (offering altar), dhvajasthambha (flagstaff) are located in the outer corridor, all facing the main shrine.

The vast space between the doorway of the Maha mandapa and the main outer entrance is mostly covered with a ceiling.

On the same mandapa, an east-facing shrine has the icon of Parasu Vinayaka.

Near the entrance, two pillars have giant statues of kings and the other two have beautiful sculptures of ladies holding deepa (oil lamps) in their hands. They are called Paavai Vilakku as per the local tradition. They are Nayaka-era workmanships.

As stated already, the entrance of Anandavalli has no tower.



### Outer Prakara

The vast and broad outer circumambulatory path that goes around both sanctums is filled with many trees and plants on either side. It appears like a small forest. A lot of peacocks and peahen are found here.





### **Holy Pond**

The vast holy pond is located outside the temple. It is named Ganga Teertha. It has steps to reach down the waters on all four sides. Each side is guarded by two sculptures of lions or Nandis. In the middle of the pond, there is a mandapa.

Happy travelling.





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# TEMPLES OF CHENNAI

*Part I*

*KRISHNAKUMAR T.K.*

